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SUBJECT: OSCE/PERMANENT COUNCIL: STATEMENT ON RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM IN KAZAKHSTAN

¶1. (U) Post is authorized to present the following statement
at the May 8 Permanent Council meeting in Vienna.

Begin Text:

Mr. Chairman,

The United States is concerned about recent reports that reflect a disturbing trend in Kazakhstan regarding religious freedom. While Kazakhstan has prided itself on its religious freedom record and tradition of inter-faith tolerance, and has on many occasions used this forum to remind us of that, several factors lead us to raise concerns today about a possible decline in the protection of religious freedom in that country.

Over recent months, there have been reports of raids on churches by the Committee of National Security, reputedly in connection with investigation of alleged treason. A land dispute with a religious minority community drags on. Several state-controlled media outlets have recently published or broadcast stories critical of &non-traditional8 religious groups. Furthermore, political leaders have made prominent statements critical of these groups.

More recently, amendments to Kazakhstan's religion law that were introduced on April 2nd would, among other things, require all religious groups to re-register under more restrictive procedures; limit the activities of smaller groups; establish a quota system to limit the number of missionaries and require local government consent for missionaries; and prohibit all financial and other contributions from foreigners and anonymous donors.

Taken together, these developments paint a disturbing picture of governmental attitudes toward the preservation of religious freedom in Kazakhstan.

OSCE commitments on freedom of religion, as specified in the Vienna Document from 1989, include the pledge that participating States will &grant believers, practicing or prepared to practice within the constitutional framework of the State, recognition,⁸ and that they will &respect the right of these religious communities to establish and maintain freely accessible places of worship or assembly, organize themselves according to their own hierarchical and institutional structure ... and solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions.⁸ In addition, at the Maastricht Ministerial in 2003, we all decided that participating States, laws, regulations, practices and policies dealing with religion should be transparent and non-discriminatory. These commitments reflect some of the most sophisticated standards on religious freedom at the international level, and all participating States should work diligently to protect these provisions and ensure full compliance.

It has been nearly 5 months since the Kazakhstani Government

assured its 55 counterparts in Madrid that Kazakhstan is strongly committed to the OSCE's human dimension, saying that , &It is commonly recognized that one of the most important achievements of Kazakhstan in the humanitarian sphere is securing the inter-ethnic and inter-religious accord. Additional emphasis on strengthening the dialogue between religions and people is the imperative demand of our time.⁸

In the spirit of these commitments reiterated in Madrid, we urge the Government of Kazakhstan to request technical assistance from ODIHR on the text of the draft amendments, as it has done in the past. We further recommend that the government consult with non-governmental organizations and religious groups, registered and unregistered alike, to ensure that laws regarding religious organizations in Kazakhstan and the actions of its officials meet OSCE commitments. In doing so, Kazakhstan would reflect the kind of transparency and inter-faith tolerance the OSCE seeks to embody.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
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